

VZCZCXRO6245
RR RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR
DE RUEHAD #0789 2181200
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 061200Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2806
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 8383

UNCLAS ABU DHABI 000789

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, DRL AND EEB/CIP/BA (DOW)

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [ECPS](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [AE](#)
SUBJECT: UAE SPYWARE GOES PUBLIC

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Widespread local and international media coverage of UAE telecom giant Etisalat's reported attempt to install spyware developed by a U.S. firm on local BlackBerries has dominated a normally quiet summer news cycle. Etisalat (Emirates Telecommunications Corporation) denied that the "performance enhancing patch" was spyware, but BlackBerry developer RIM refuted the claim and offered instructions on how to remove it. The public uproar suggests Etisalat may lose some BlackBerry customers, but its dominant market position is unlikely to change. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On July 11, some EmbOffs received Etisalat text messages on their official BlackBerries stating "Etisalat is always keen to provide you with the best BlackBerry service and ultimate experience, for that we will be sending you a performance enhancement patch that you need to install on your device." While EmbOffs received no follow up messages, local English-language media began reporting that some Etisalat BlackBerry customers were experiencing battery drainage after installing a performance enhancing patch. Independent Dubai-based Gulf News was particularly critical, even semi-official Abu Dhabi-based The National carried significant coverage, and similar criticism appeared in the Arabic language press.

13. (SBU) On July 15, Etisalat released a statement claiming that a BlackBerry settings conflict resulted in "a slight technical default." However, on July 17, Research in Motion (RIM), the Canadian developer of BlackBerry, published its own statement that Etisalat "appears to have distributed a telecommunications surveillance application that was designed and developed by (U.S. firm) SS8." The statement also provides instructions on how to detect and remove third party applications. Subsequent press reporting suggested Etisalat was planning to meet with RIM, but there has been no public information that meeting has occurred.

14. (SBU) While there has been little speculation about why Etisalat would be eavesdropping, the firm's reputation has suffered. An online poll of Etisalat BlackBerry users revealed 36 percent of respondents planned to cancel their Etisalat service as a result of the spyware fiasco and switch to rival provider Emirates Integrated Telecommunication Company (du). However, Etisalat, which is 60 percent owned by the UAE government, is likely to retain its significant market share. Its stock price has risen marginally along with a general rise in local markets.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The critical press coverage is particularly remarkable as Etisalat is majority owned by the UAEG, the dominant telecommunications company and a significant source of revenue for the federal government. That criticism appeared in Arabic-language media, not just English media favored by expats, represents crossing another information firebreak. However, few have publically speculated why or at whose bequest Etisalat would be installing spyware or what would be done with the information gathered (reported in other channels); it appears some journalistic red lines still exist. END COMMENT.

16. (SBU) NOTE: IRM Washington has confirmed that Mission BlackBerry users are protected from such spyware. END NOTE.

